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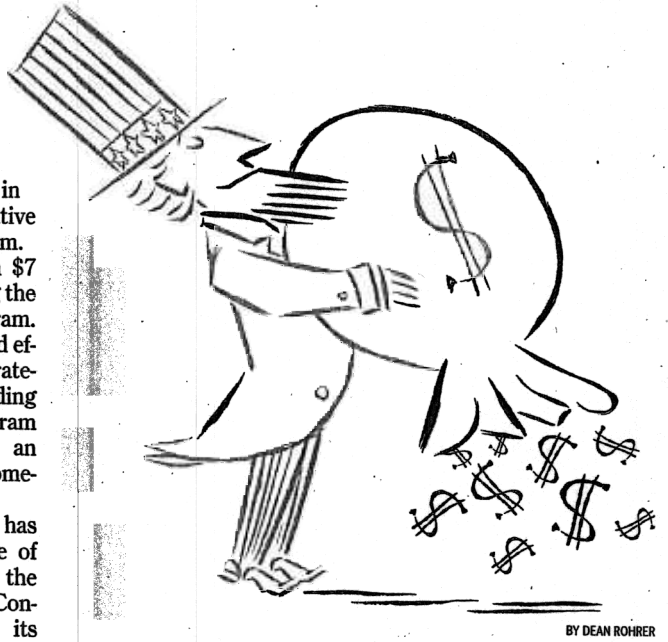
Wasteful 'Threat Reduction' in Russia



BY DEAN ROHRER

Deep in the heart of Russia stands an enormous, new, empty facility built with 100 million American tax dollars. It has no purpose or future. It is a monumental example of U.S. good intentions gone awry and another disturbing chapter in the history of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program.

Twelve years and more than $7 billion later, it is worth revisiting the original purpose of this program. Designed as a temporary, focused effort to shrink Moscow's vast strategic arsenal with American funding and know-how, the CTR program has, over time, morphed into an open-ended, unfocused and sometimes self-defeating venture.

On balance the initiative has achieved a respectable measure of success, in the process earning the support of many members of Congress, including myself. Since its 1991 inception, the Department of Defense-funded initiative has eliminated nearly 500 ballistic missiles and 370 submarine-launched types, as well as 25 missile submarines and 100 nuclear-capable bombers.

The program initially focused on such strategic nuclear systems, most of which were aimed at American territory, because they posed a grave threat to U.S. national security. But CTR money eventually gave chase (rather unsuccessfully) to a slew of other projects that few would characterize as meeting a similar standard.

The results of this drift are evident in remote Krasnoyarsk, Russia, where American taxpayers, at Moscow's request, built a $100 million-plus facility to convert rocket fuel from nuclear missiles into chemicals useful for making consumer products. The immense plant was finished last year, but it will never be used for its intended purpose, because Russia, before the plant was completed and without telling us, used most of the volatile liquids to gas up its space program and pad its satellite-launch profits. Useless now, the high-priced compound will recoup the United States only about $1 million after its valuables are gutted.

In an equally wasteful example of CTR mismanagement, the United States dumped $100 million into a plant that will not even be built. Again at Moscow's behest, Washington committed to build a state-of-the-art, environmentally sound disposal facility (the blueprints alone cost $80 million) to burn off missile engines indoors. This time, Moscow stood idle while a small-town politician from Votkinsk blocked the necessary land-use permits to exploit groundless environmental fears during a local campaign.

The United States could have bankrolled vital nonproliferation projects with these wasted funds—about $230 million combined; more than half of this year's total CTR budget—but a lack of accountability, transparency and sound planning prevented it. In Krasnoyarsk, the Department of Defense bet on a handshake that the rocket fuel would be there when the time came, even though Russia has been launching missiles with the same fuel for more than 30 years. At Votkinsk, U.S. officials erroneously and naively assumed that Moscow would produce the critical permits.

Amazingly, program officials may not have learned the obvious lesson. They are currently considering a plan devised by Russia to dispose of the same missile engines with refurbished outdoor burners, even though this approach would be much dirtier and there is no guarantee of securing land-use permits. This project could run another $80 million.

At the same time, for every dollar the United States commits to helping Russia destroy these weapons, we run the risk that Moscow will use the savings to fund military programs that are contrary to U.S. national security interests. For example, the White House told us in January that Russia maintains a biological weapons program and may keep—at great expense—an ability to mobilize its chemical weapons production facilities, in violation of its treaty obligations. We were also told that the Kremlin is procuring new intercontinental ballistic missiles it brags can defeat American missile defenses (even though the forthcoming U.S. system is not designed against Russia).

The Department of Defense does not make the United States appreciably safer by disposing of surplus rocket fuel and stationary missile engines. These materials cannot be easily carted off by would-be terrorists, who could not use them anyhow. The fuel and engines instead represent an environmental challenge—one that might warrant a good many Russian rubles but certainly not hundreds of millions of already overstretched U.S. defense dollars.

If the Cooperative Threat Reduction program is to once again benefit U.S. national security, it must refocus its resources on real threats and ensure real Russian cooperation. Moscow's leadership has to understand that it cannot stand by as CTR projects fail, $100 million at a time, and still expect U.S. assistance. Either way, the stakes are high enough that Congress must maintain a strong continued oversight role to ensure that this program and others like it remain true to their original principles and that every U.S. dollar invested yields tangible and verifiable results in reducing any remaining threats to America.

The writer, a Republican representative from California, is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.